

Mormons or Christians — Who Are Better?

by Herb Silverman

The title of this article is a bit of a trick question, since Mormons consider themselves to be Christians, while most Christians don't consider Mormons to be Christians. It's also unfair to stereotype such large classes of people. And there are considerable differences between liberal and conservative Christians as well as between liberal and conservative Mormons.

Nevertheless, I'll make my case for Mormons. I certainly don't condone their anti-gay and anti-atheist positions. I also don't give any credibility to the *Book of Mormon*, which states that after Jesus died, but before he went to heaven, Jesus stopped in the United States — in Missouri. When Jesus returns, he will again go to Missouri. How do we know? Because this story was allegedly chiseled in Egyptian hieroglyphics on gold plates and buried in Palmyra, New York.

In 1827, the angel **Moroni** supposedly led **Joseph Smith** to the gold plates and also to a magic stone. When Joe put the magic stone into his hat and buried his face in it, he was able to translate the gold plates into English.

This story, of course, is silly — but how much sillier than the claim that Jesus rose from the dead, or that one can drink his blood and eat his body every Sunday, or that a talking snake tricked a first couple into eating a forbidden piece of fruit?

I can enjoy a chuckle over many such religious beliefs, as long as they don't intrude on the daily lives of those who don't believe such nonsense. When **Mitt Romney**, a Mormon, first ran for president in 2008, he was asked about his religion. Romney said, "The most unusual thing in my church is that we believe there was once a flood upon the Earth, and that a man took a boat and put two of each animal inside the boat, and saved humanity by doing that."

Romney essentially said that his holy book is no more ridiculous than the holy book of Christians. I think he has a point, and I would be surprised if Romney believes this story.

I generally prefer people who don't believe most of the doctrines of the faith in which they were raised. I've met Mormons who either did not know the preposterous angel Moroni story of the gold plates, or didn't believe it to be true. On the other hand, it appears that most Christians believe that God sent his Son, Jesus, to Earth to die on a cross and be resurrected. Further, people who accept this story will have an eternity of bliss and those who don't will face an eternity of torture.

I watched with some sympathy when Romney ran unsuccessfully for president in 2008. My sympathy was not for his political positions at the time, but because surveys showed the main thing atheist and Mormon political candidates had in common was that a significant number of Americans said they wouldn't vote for either — no matter how qualified the candidate. Perhaps that's why Mormon politicians tend to downplay their Mormonism. I wish more Christian politicians would downplay their Christianity!

While I want to know the political positions of candidates, I also like to know whether they base their political decisions more on evidence or religious faith. I could be comfortable with a candidate who says she would compartmentalize her (irrational) faith-based beliefs and govern rationally on

evidence-based information. I gained some respect for Republican Senator Romney in 2020 when he voted to convict **Donald Trump** and remove him from office. Former Republican Senator **Jeff Flake**, also a Mormon, was another vocal critic of Trump.

I respected Romney's father, **George Romney** (Mormon and Republican), who, as governor of Michigan, strongly supported civil rights. In early 1960 he was on the Fair Campaign Practices Committee, which issued a report stating that "no candidate for elected office should be supported or opposed due to their religion and that no campaign for office should be seen as an opportunity to vote for one religion against another." This statement helped pave the way for Catholic **John F. Kennedy's** famous speech later that year, when he said he believed in an America "where the separation of church and state is absolute." As president, Kennedy gave secular arguments for decisions he made on behalf of the country.

George Romney was initially a front-runner for the Republican nomination for president in 1968, but his honesty got him into trouble. After a tour of Vietnam, Romney acknowledged that he had been brainwashed and could no longer support the war, reversing his earlier position that the Vietnam War was "morally right and necessary." **Richard Nixon**, a war supporter, won the nomination and was elected.

Then there are the Mormon Udall politicians, all of whom seemed to be decent. **Mo Udall** succeeded his brother, Congressman **Stuart Udall**, after President Kennedy appointed Stuart Secretary of the Interior. Mo served in the House until 1991. I voted for Mo in the 1976 Democratic primary for president.

Mo gained national political notice in 1967, when he gave a speech to civic leaders who were mostly supporters of President **Lyndon B. Johnson's** policy on the Vietnam War. Mo was the first major figure in the Democratic Party to openly oppose the Democratic President on the war. His speech drew media attention, and led to the Democratic Party's gradual split over the war.

Mo co-sponsored the Federal Election Act of 1971 and the 1974 Campaign Reform Act. He was known for his humor and irreverence. For instance, as a member of the House Post Office Committee, he said: "Let's turn inflation over to the Post Office. That'll slow it down." Because of his wit, columnist **James J. Kilpatrick** deemed him "too funny to be president," which later became the title of Mo's autobiography.

Mo commanded an all-Black squadron in Louisiana during World War II, supporting them in their fights over local discrimination. He stopped being an active member of the Mormon Church because of its policy of prohibiting Blacks from serving in the priesthood, and he eventually abandoned his Mormon faith. In 1978, Mormon President **Spencer W. Kimball** claimed that God had removed the curse on Blacks and that worthy Black men could now become priests. I rather like the Mormon idea that God sometimes changes his mind, unlike the Christian view of their inerrant holy book.

Mo's son, **Mark Udall**, was elected to the U.S. Congress in 1998, and to the U.S. Senate in Colorado in 2008. His

nephew, **Tom Udall**, was elected to the U.S. Senate in Arizona in 2008.

I prefer the Mormon imaginary afterlife to the Christian one. Mormons baptize dead people. Many Jews are upset that Mormons posthumously baptized Holocaust victims, including Anne Frank and Simon Wiesenthal's parents. Perhaps my relatives who died in the Holocaust were also baptized. That's fine with me. I think it's ridiculous, but it does no harm to my dead relatives or to me. In fact, this practice seems like an expression of good will, much like, "I'll pray for you." I believe in its sentiment, if not its efficacy.

So, Mormons would give me a posthumous chance to convert. Christians, on the other hand, would simply have me burn in hell forever. I've always said I'd become a believer if presented with evidence. I think the probability of the Christian or Mormon afterlife is zero, but the Mormon one is more compassionate.

You should know that I've been using politically incorrect terminology. In 2018, Mormon President **Russel M. Nelson** said that Mormons should no longer be called Mormons. He said we should call them members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. So, I'm happy to acknowledge that I enjoy listening to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints Tabernacle Choir.

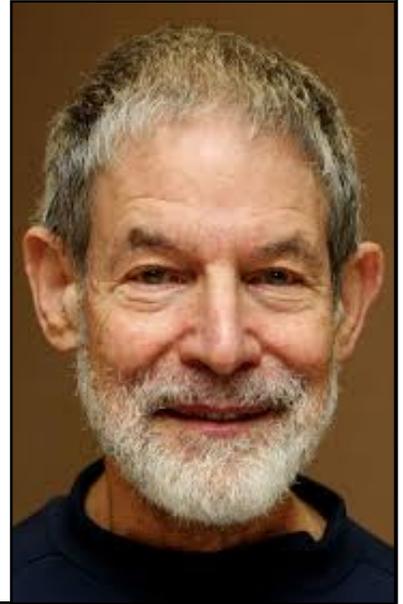
I prefer some other things Mormons do and believe over similar Christian issues. I'm fond of Mormon dietary guidelines, which include mostly fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and with meat eaten sparingly. I like that Mormons abstain from tobacco, which I wish everybody did, but I would hate to give up my morning coffee or dinner glass of wine. □

Herb Silverman is a regular contributor to the Freethought Society's ezine *The Freethought Society News*. He is a Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Mathematics at the College of Charleston.

Silverman is the author of two books, *Candidate Without a Prayer* and *An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land*. Both books are available through [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com). Designating "The Freethought Society" as your AmazonSmile benefits recipient automatically increases the organization's funds.

Silverman ran for governor of South Carolina in the 1990s to challenge a state law that required religious belief to hold public office.

In 1990, a colleague pointed out that atheists were ineligible to hold public office in South Carolina. After an eight-year battle, Herb won a unanimous decision in the South Carolina Supreme Court, which struck down this religious test requirement.



Announcing the 2021 Freethought Society Secular Student Alliance Scholarship!

We are pleased to announce that a \$1,000 scholarship will be given to one Secular Student Alliance member who is enrolled in any high school or college in the United States. The Secular Student Alliance empowers secular students to proudly express their identity, build welcoming communities, promote secular values, and set a course for lifelong activism. The Freethought Society scholarship is designed to support a student who, in addition to pursuing excellence in their academic studies, is also an activist for secular values on their campus and/or in their community. Visit the Secular Student Alliance website to learn more about the scholarship:

<https://secularstudents.org/scholarships>



Secular Scholarships Available Now

Apply by August 31 at secularstudents.org

secular
student
alliance